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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet presents the Executive Summary of the Report of the Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades. Results depict a pervasive pattern of underachievement for millions of U.S. children. The document outlines nine principles of effective practice for all institutions key to children's learning, and calls on these institutions to operate with the assumption that all children can learn and are capable of high-quality work when properly challenged and supported. These principles are: (1) ensure from the start that children are ready to learn, physically and emotionally; (2) set high expectations for every child; (3) create high-quality varied learning environments; (4) provide high-level professional development to those responsible for children's education; (5) embed children's learning in caring and collaborative relationships with educators, parents, and other adults; (6) actively engage parents in their children's education; (7) accept responsibility and accountability for each child's learning; (8) make efficient, equitable use of resources for children's education; and (9) collaborate more closely with other institutions and programs that affect children's learning. The pamphlet concludes with suggestions for reducing disparities in funding, making rational use of available resources, and realigning priorities. (AA)

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YEARS OF PROMISE

A Comprehensive Learning Strategy for America's Children

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In 1994 the Corporation convened the Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades to examine all the forces that contribute to children's learning and development during the age span from three to ten. The twenty-three-member group of business and political leaders, scientists, educators, researchers, and practitioners conducted extensive reviews of research and programmatic experience, made site visits to sixty programs in thirty communities throughout the country, and engaged in formal hearings and informal discussions with parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders.

Years of Promise: A Comprehensive Learning Strategy for America's Children is the report of the task force. This pamphlet presents a brief summary of the main themes and recommendations of the report.

Single copies of the full report may be obtained for $10. Bulk rates for the report are 11 – 20 copies: $8 each; 21 – 50 copies: $6; 51 – 100: $5; 101+: $4; bookstore rate: $6. Checks or money orders should be made payable to Carnegie Corporation of New York, P. O. Box 753, Waldorf, MD 20604. Telephone: (301) 654-2742 or (212) 207-6285. Fax: (301) 843-0159. E-mail: ccny@tasco.com. **Prepayment is required.** Credit card or purchase orders will not be accepted. The summary is available on the Internet by accessing either **gopher.carnegie.org** or **http://www.carnegie.org** on the World Wide Web.

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YEARS OF PROMISE

A Comprehensive Learning Strategy for America's Children

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE REPORT OF THE CARNEGIE TASK FORCE
ON LEARNING IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK
SEPTEMBER 1996

Executive Summary

The years from three to ten are a crucial age span in a young person's life, when a firm foundation is laid for healthy development and lifelong learning. During these seven years, children make great leaps in cognition, language acquisition, and reasoning, corresponding with dramatic neurological changes. They develop greater facility in intellectual problem solving and abstract thinking. Their store of knowledge swells, their attention span stretches, their capacity for reflection increases. They become more proficient in their oral and written communication and better able to relate ideas and feelings to their peers. They also develop greater capability to regulate their own behavior and resolve conflict peacefully. For most children in this age period it is not too late to overcome earlier difficulties; nor is it too early to prepare for the challenges of early adolescence and middle school.

For most children, the long-term success of their learning and development depends to a great extent on what happens to them during these years of promise. Children fortunate enough to attend a high-quality preschool or child care program and who enter the primary grades with adequate preparation have a better

chance of achieving to high levels than those who do not. Children who attend an elementary school that sets high learning standards and does whatever it takes to see that children meet those standards have a better chance of leaving fourth grade proficient in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. Children whose parents create a home environment that encourages learning and who remain involved in their children's education throughout the years from three to ten earn higher grades than those whose parents are uninvolved. Children from communities that provide parents supportive programs aimed at enhancing children's healthy development and achievement and that offer out-of-school opportunities emphasizing learning do better academically than those who have not had such opportunities.

The Pattern of Underachievement

All children are born ready and willing to learn. But as they progress to and through the primary grades, a great many lose their natural curiosity and enthusiasm for learning. Millions of children are not achieving as much or as well as they could, in school or out. Most preschool programs do not prepare children for the more rigorous academic curricula that are being adopted in the primary grades. The vast majority of early care and education programs fail to meet standards of quality. As many as one-third of American children today are enter-

ing kindergarten already needing additional support to keep up with their peers. Once in school, young students are not coming close to mastering the concepts, knowledge, and skills they will need to succeed later in life.

The pattern of underachievement is especially stark for children of low-income families and children of diverse cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds, who by and large are not receiving the teaching and support they should have as they move from home to school to neighborhood and other settings. For them, the deck can be unfairly stacked against academic success, and the years of promise can fade to hopelessness and resignation.

Underachievement is a General Problem. But make no mistake about it: underachievement is not a crisis of certain groups: it is not limited to the poor; it is not a problem afflicting *other* people's children. Many middle- and upper-income children are also falling behind intellectually. Indeed, by the fourth grade, the performance of *most* children in the United States is below what it should be for the nation and is certainly below the achievement levels of children in competing countries. According to standards set by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), today's fourth graders are not sufficiently proficient in reading, writing, and mathematics to be able to cope successfully in the information-based, globalized economy of the next century.

- In the 1994 NAEP assessment, nearly three-quarters of the nation's fourth graders could not meet the criteria for proficiency in reading set for their grade. Forty-two percent were unable to reach even the basic level of performance, which requires only literal comprehension of reading passages.

- In 1994, two-thirds of fourth graders could not meet the standards set for persuasive writing, narrative writing, and informative writing. On persuasive writing, nine out of ten could not meet the proficiency standards.

- In mathematics, 82 percent of fourth graders could not meet the standards on the 1992 NAEP assessment; 39 percent could not solve easy problems, such as "divide 108 by 9."

- In case studies comparing the performance of U.S. urban schools with that of Asian urban schools, the average mathematics score of fifth-grade children in only one American school was as high as that of fifth-grade children in the lowest-performing Asian school.

Has American Education Deteriorated?

Contrary to popular belief, today's schoolchildren are performing about as well as their parents and teachers did twenty-five

years ago. Most American schools are managing to hold the line academically, despite the tough challenges of higher child poverty rates, frayed communities and families, and a continual stream of immigrants. Some groups — notably African Americans — are doing better than ever before. But the United States of the twenty-first century will require a much more highly educated and skilled population than it has now if it is to maintain future prosperity and ensure democratic renewal. No longer can the American education system allow so many young people to fall short of their academic promise.

Today, Americans are seeing the drastic shortcomings of an education system that is geared to the academic success of some but not all. They worry that the nation could slide into economic insecurity if their children are ill-equipped to meet the complex demands of the twenty-first century. Some may even conclude that the problems are just too big, too costly, and too overwhelming to counteract or reverse.

As confidence in the nation's education system has slipped, there has been a tendency among parents, educators, business leaders, and others to engage in mutual blaming. Such disillusionment and cynicism are mistaken. Since the 1970s, researchers have documented the many practices within families and communities as well as preschools and schools that have been shown to foster learning among chil-

dren of diverse backgrounds. Today, hundreds of early learning programs, schools, school districts, teacher groups, researchers, and technical assistance organizations are demonstrating success in preventing or reversing the pattern of underachievement among children, even under the most difficult conditions. No one has all the answers yet. But enough is now known about learning and development in children between the ages of three and ten to begin making significant progress in improving the education of *every* child. What needs to happen now is to put this knowledge and wisdom to work, within and across the sectors, on a large-enough scale to make significant improvement in children's educational achievement nationwide.

Every Child Can Learn

One of the myths that has undermined school reform efforts — and damaged millions of children — is the belief that differences in the educational performance of schools are primarily the result of differences in students' inherent ability to learn. This belief is wrong. Schools fail for other reasons. Most significantly, they fail because of the low expectations they hold out for many students; the heavy reliance that schools place on outmoded or ineffective curricula and teaching methods; poorly prepared or insufficiently supported teachers; weak home/school linkages; the lack of adequate accountability systems; and inef-

fective allocation of resources by schools and school systems.

Circumstances of birth do indeed raise the odds against children's educational success, but these odds are not insuperable. Studies show repeatedly that children's academic performance is determined more by the time and effort they devote to learning, and by the time and effort that schools invest in teaching them, than by their inborn abilities. With the right combination of challenge and support from parents, educators, and the community, virtually every child, by the end of the fourth grade, can be reading, writing, and doing math and science at levels now achieved by only a few.

The Circle of Responsibility

The first requirement in preventing widespread school failure and underachievement is for the key learning institutions in children's lives to alter the basic assumptions about the quality of work that children can be expected to produce, so that each child is challenged to meet high expectations for learning and achievement and is given the necessary support to succeed.

Schools by themselves, however, cannot accomplish these goals for children. Schools have the primary responsibility for children's formal education, but students' educational success is influenced by far more than what happens to them in the formal system. Families and communities, preschools, after-schools, and the media all

have a profound impact on children's learning, and not just during the school years — well before they enter the classroom. When a single child fails to achieve, all of these institutions are likely to be at fault. All of these institutions, therefore, have a shared responsibility to contribute positively to children's learning and development. All must begin to ask what they can do to help reverse the pattern of underachievement and bring our education system into line with our national need for a wholly educated population.

Principles of Effective Practice. Within each of these spheres of influence, there are certain principles of effective practice that have already been put to work — in parent education programs, preschools, schools, community organizations, and other key learning institutions — and that are producing positive results for diverse groups of children. From studies and evaluations of these programs, it is possible to derive certain principles of best practice that are common to all. The task force calls on all the institutions that contribute fundamentally to children's learning to start today to align their policies and day-to-day practices more closely with these common principles of effective practice, outlined below:

- Ensure, from the start, that children are ready to learn, physically and emotionally.

- Set high expectations for every child, monitor the child's progress continually, and intervene quickly when problems arise.
- Create high-quality, varied learning environments that support each child's learning.
- Provide high-level professional development to those responsible for children's education and development.
- Embed children's learning in caring and collaborative relationships with educators, parents, and other adults.
- Actively engage parents in their children's education at home and at school.
- Accept responsibility and accountability for each child's learning and healthy development.
- Make efficient, equitable use of resources for children's education.
- Collaborate more closely with other institutions and programs that affect children's learning.

Taken together, these principles of best practice provide a broad framework for a comprehensive learning strategy proposed by the task force. If this framework is accepted by the nation, if these principles are applied within all the core learning institutions in children's lives, and if these practices are coordinated to provide children a more coherent learning experience, then all children will achieve to levels that

exceed current expectations of their performance. Even if institutions do not link their efforts, there is much that each can do independently to contribute to children's educational success; the failure of one to do its job effectively, therefore, is no justification for the others to falter in their own efforts on children's behalf.

Task Force Recommendations

The task force recommendations can be encompassed within a five-point program, as follows:

- **Promote Children's Learning in Families and Communities:** Families are the wellspring of learning for children. To assist parents and other caregivers in fulfilling their role as children's first teachers, the task force recommends that states and communities make available to every interested family with preschool or primary grade children effective parent education and family support programs that promote learning and healthy child development. Early care and education programs and elementary schools should involve parents in their services to children. Communities should expand and improve their out-of-school programs, so that their activities are linked to children learning curricula in school. More efforts should be made to accommodate children from low-income fam-

ilies, children with disabilities, and children whose first language is not English. Quality standards for all community programs for children should be established and enforced.

- **Expand High-Quality Early Learning Opportunities:** During the preschool years, children make the developmental leaps that form the basis of later achievement. To get all children ready for school and for an education that meets high standards of achievement, the task force recommends that the nation make a commitment to expanded high-quality public and private early care and education programs for children ages three to five, supported by national, state, and local mechanisms that are coordinated to assure adequate financing.

  In this mixed system of private and publicly supported programs, higher standards should be developed for facilities, staff qualifications, and overall program performance.

- **Create Effective Elementary Schools and School Systems:** High-quality preschools will not, however, produce lasting benefits for children if they are followed by poor elementary school experiences. The task force, therefore, recommends that states play a leading role in developing and adopting high-

quality standards that specify what each elementary school student should know and be able to do across all subject areas. They should set rigorous performance standards in math, reading, writing, and science for the end of the fourth grade.

Educators should apply the same standards of academic performance to virtually all students and use every available method to ensure that each student succeeds in meeting the requirements. Language-minority children should be offered an equal opportunity to learn the same challenging content and high-level skills expected of students proficient in English. For the small proportion of children who may not be able to meet all of the standards due to severe disabilities that affect learning, individual education plans should set reasonable goals toward meeting the highest standards possible.

States and school districts should invest adequate money, time, and support in professional development of school staff. Professional development should be closely related to the school's overall strategy for meeting high standards of achievement and should encompass the use of effective instructional practices in the classroom.

Elementary schools and districts need to monitor continually each

child's progress toward the fourth-grade standards, beginning in kindergarten and the first grade, and intervene with additional time and varied instruction as soon as a child falls behind. School districts should monitor schools, and states should monitor districts, to provide additional support and intervention when children are not progressing toward the goals.

- **Promote High-Quality Children's Television and Access to Other Electronic Media:** Television and emerging interactive technologies offer a powerful, underutilized opportunity to motivate children and help them meet the higher learning standards. The task force recommends that the President, Congress, media executives, and business leaders vigorously enforce the provisions of the Children's Television Act of 1990, to ensure that every community has a variety of choices for high-quality children's educational programming throughout the week. Communities should engage local businesses as partners in efforts to create broad access to the new information technologies and sophisticated computer applications, so that no child is denied full opportunity to use these creative learning tools.

- **Link the Key Learning Institutions into a Comprehensive, Coordinated Education System:** The discontinuities in the educational experiences of young children call for the creation of comprehensive, continuous services that link families, early care and education, and schools so that children's learning and development are reinforced from every side. State and local leadership councils or committees should create strategic plans to address the learning and developmental needs of children, based on the recommendations of this report.

Making Rational Use of Resources

Almost all of the task force recommendations can be carried out by realigning priorities and making far better use of existing monetary and nonmonetary resources — eliminating programs that do not significantly improve teaching and learning and putting existing funds toward programs that work. More public financing, however, will be needed to vastly improve the quality and availability of early care and education programs, so that children of three, four, and five receive adequate preparation for school and academic life and progress toward meeting the new learning standards. Finally, efforts must be made to reduce the dramatic disparities in public school funding across states and districts.

Many actions are needed at different levels to reverse the pattern of underachievement among the nation's children. But what is required above all is the conviction that dramatic improvement in children's learning is possible if Americans work together to build the sturdy institutions needed to assure achievement, opportunity, and coherence in the educational experience of all children. Between the ages of three and ten, children make great leaps in their intellectual prowess, social skills, and ability to manage the emotional ups and downs that are part of everyday life. If all of us could see their mental agility as easily as we observe their growing physical agility, then more Americans would believe that all children can learn to levels that far surpass our expectations.

It is within the nation's power to accomplish these results for children. If we fail to keep the promise — if we continue to focus on the most fortunate youngsters and leave the rest behind — the costs to our society in human distress, lost productivity, crime, and welfare, and in the fraying of our nation's democratic ideals, will be unbearable. The choice is ours.

Members, Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades

Shirley M. Malcom
Cochair
Head
Directorate for Education and Human Resources Programs
American Association for the Advancement of Science
Washington, D.C.

James D. Watkins
Cochair
Admiral, U.S. Navy (Retired)
President
Consortium for Oceanographic Research and Education
Washington, D.C.

Bruce M. Alberts
President
National Academy of Sciences
Washington, D.C.

Anthony J. Alvarado
Superintendent
Community School District Two
New York, New York

Richard I. Beattie
Chairman
Executive Committee
Simpson Thacher & Bartlett
New York, New York

Cynthia G. Brown
Director
Resource Center on Educational Equity
Council of Chief State School Officers
Washington, D.C.

John L. Clendenin
Chairman of the Board and
Chief Executive Officer
BellSouth Corporation
Atlanta, Georgia

James P. Comer, M.D.
Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry
Child Study Center
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Adela Coronado-Greeley
1994 Illinois Teacher of the Year
Inter-American Magnet School
Chicago, Illinois

Ernesto Cortés, Jr.
Southwest Regional Director
Industrial Areas Foundation
Austin, Texas

Linda Darling-Hammond
William F. Russell Professor in Curriculum and Teaching and
Executive Director, National Commission on Teaching and America's Future
Teachers College
Columbia University
New York, New York

Douglas Fuchs
Professor of Special Education
Peabody College
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee

Kenji Hakuta
Professor
School of Education
Stanford University
Stanford, California

Sharon Lynn Kagan
Senior Associate
Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Stephen Martinez
Principal
Edison Language Academy
Santa Monica–Malibu Unified School District
Santa Monica, California

Richard P. Mills
Commissioner of Education
State of New York
Albany, New York

Martha Minow
Professor
Harvard Law School
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Allan R. Odden
Professor and Codirector
Consortium for Policy Research in Education
University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin

Lauren Resnick
Professor of Psychology and Director
Learning Research and Development Center
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Roy Romer
Governor
State of Colorado
Denver, Colorado

Carole Simpson
Senior Correspondent
Anchor, *World News Sunday*
ABC News
Washington, D.C.

Robert E. Slavin
Codirector
Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk
Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, Maryland

Sidney A. Thompson
Superintendent of Schools
Los Angeles Unified School District
Los Angeles, California

Staff, Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades

Antony Ward
Executive Director

Rima Shore
Consultant/Writer

Jeannette L. Aspden
Editor for Special Projects

Anne E. Bordonaro
Research Associate

Marchelle M. Rush
Administrative Assistant

Participating Staff, Carnegie Corporation of New York

David A. Hamburg
President

Vivien Stewart
Senior Advisor to the President and Program Chair

Avery Russell
Director of Publications and Program Officer

Anthony W. Jackson
Program Officer

Michael H. Levine
Program Officer

Frederic A. Mosher
Senior Policy Analyst

Nidia Martí
Executive Assistant

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